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Bitter Sweet

Valerie Nario

Loyola Marymount University

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I still remember the day I received that big white envelope in the mail from Loyola Marymount University. My mom went to go get the mail from our mailbox, and when she noticed the white envelope she rushed back into the house. She was so excited about opening it up. It was always my parents' dream for me to come to LMU, especially my mom's. Ms. Daws and Ms. De La Cruz, two of my AVID teachers, used to always mention to us that large envelopes were always good news, so when I saw it I had the most immense smile on my face. I couldn't actually believe that a school like LMU would accept me; it really did seem too good to be true.

Nerves started kicking in and a little sweat started to drip down my head from how anxious I was. Once I opened it, I saw "Congratulations, you have been accepted into Loyola Marymount University." My mom and I were literally jumping around the living room, and I'm pretty sure our neighbors thought we were crazy. After reading over my acceptance letter, so many memories were going through my head, especially the times when I would see the LMU letters from the freeway growing up.

We had to get up extra early every morning to go to school in order to be on time. We couldn't leave the house later than 6:45 in the morning, or else we would be late. I can never forget those bumper-to-bumper morning rides to school on the 405 freeway to the 90 listening to Big Boy in the morning or Hot 92.3. I would be tired but listening and singing along to the music with my mom made the car ride go faster. This had to happen during my elementary and middle school years because my family and I lived in Inglewood, California, but my parents put my siblings and me in Santa Monica schools. According to my parents, I would have a better education in the Santa Monica district. I never knew why, but I'm sure it had to do with the name and city. Putting Santa Monica High instead of Inglewood High on my applications already displays the different type of education I received. Both of my parents were born, raised and went to school in Santa Monica, and they wanted to put me through the same system.

Since we lived in Inglewood, we lied about our address, which was pretty common with many of SAMOHI's students. Luckily, my grandma still lived in Santa Monica, so we were able to use her address. Unfortunately, during my eighth grade year my grandma passed away, and we couldn't lie about where we lived anymore. We applied for a permit, but the Inglewood district denied us. So we appealed and went for the permit again, and we were denied once again. We tried one last time because my mom wanted to continue fighting for it, and like the last two times, we were told no. I remember my mom telling me, "I don't know what we're going to do; we can't afford to buy a home in Santa Monica," even though that was always my parents' dream. She was determined for us to continue going to school in Santa Monica, so a month later, my parents ended up finding a condo there.

“*Mija*, we will do anything for you and your brother and sisters to get a good education,” my mom told me.

Every time we entered the 90 freeway, we passed the big white LMU letters on the bluff. My mom would always tell me, “That’s going to be your school someday.” During my early years I would just be like. “Okay, mom,” not really understanding why that school was so important. Every morning, I would always turn to my left to look at the letters and wondered what those buildings on the top of the hills were.

From a young age, I knew that school was important because I was told so, and of course I always believed in what people told me. It all began in fifth grade when Mrs. Duran-Contreras mentioned to me about a program called AVID. The focus of this program is to help students whose parents didn’t receive a college degree understand what it takes to get into college. Mrs. Duran-Contreras was my STRINGS teacher, a program developed within my elementary school. During one of our STRINGS sessions Mrs. Duran-Contreras pulled me to the side.

“Please wait when class is over. I want to talk to you.”

At first all I could think in my head was, “Oh man, am I in trouble” I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m a good student.” At the end of the day, Mrs. Duran approached me and started talking about John Adams Middle School.

“Have you ever heard about the AVID program?” She asked.

“No.”

She explained to me what the program was about and after school she approached my mom to explain to her about the program, as well.

During my 6th grade year, I applied to be part of AVID. I never thought I was smart or good enough to be in that type of program. I was always behind with my reading and writing scores compared to the other kids. I thought being the quiet one was going to be an issue, too. It was the first time I experienced an interview, which was new and scary for me. I didn’t know what to expect or what to say. I don’t even remember what I said in the interview because of how nervous I was, especially since it was a group interview. A couple of weeks later, notifications started getting passed out. I saw that some of my friends got accepted and all I could think about was, “Man, I didn’t get in.” I began to feel sad and disappointed because I thought I was going to let my parents down. How else was I supposed to learn about preparing for high school and college? A day later, Ms. Daws, the main AVID teacher at the time, handed me a piece of paper after class because she was also my humanities teacher.

At the end of school, I remember rushing to my mom’s car.

“Guess what?”

“What happened?”

“I got into AVID.”

She was so happy and proud of me. I felt that I was making my parents proud - - now I just needed to find my way to college.

Being an AVID student continues until your senior year in high school. One of the very first classes, Ms.Kariya (my freshman year AVID teacher), asked the class,

“Does anyone know the difference between UC’s, CSU’s and private universities?”

I remember having this complete blank reaction on my face, and waiting for another student to answer because I had no idea what the difference was. In my head I thought to myself,

“Aren’t all universities the same and offer the same things?”

Boy was I completely wrong. I remember after that class I felt like I learned about a whole new different world. Not only are they three different types of education systems, but also there are different application requirements, plus they are funded differently. I knew that I understood it now, so I wondered if my parents would understand if I tried to explain it to them.

Another class period we learned about the importance of getting involved with extracurricular activities. First off, since I never heard that word before, I was quite confused.

“Extracurricular? What does that even mean?”

I didn’t want my fellow classmates judging me about not knowing the meaning so I just kept to myself. Little did I know that a few students felt the same way.

Fortunately I got a head-start at learning what classes I needed to take in high school to graduate and for my applications. Ms. O’Brien and Ms. Lang did a great job at explaining to us what the A-G requirements are. We also had to keep a certain GPA or we would be on academic probation, which was never an option for me; I knew that only A’s were acceptable. AVID hired students from different universities to be our tutors, which helped me academically. Because I developed such a great relationship with Ms. Daws, she put in a good word for me with the teachers at SAMOHI. I appreciated how much she cared and showed me that I had a great amount of potential to go to university.

Once I got to Santa Monica High what stayed in my head the most was the fact that my AVID teachers made it seem that we were all going to get helped very well financially. Truthfully I didn’t know that college was so expensive.

My family and I thought that I did not have to worry about paying for my college education. I knew we weren’t low income but I also knew we weren’t wealthy. I felt that because my family and I are not rich, we wouldn’t have to worry about paying for school. I never thought my social class would affect where I could go to college.

During the spring semester of my senior year, it was exciting getting my acceptance letters. My first one was the best feeling in the world. I remember getting home and seeing a letter from California State University, Northridge on the table.

“Valerie! Open it!” my mom expressed with excitement.

I had trouble opening the envelope and accidentally ended up ripping it all up.

“I got in! Someone actually thinks that I have potential.”

Getting my first acceptance is a feeling I will never forget. It is unbelievable because you begin to think about all the hard work and effort that you put throughout the years: walking into my first club meeting looking at everyone all timid and nervous, staying up late doing homework listening to Beyonce, sitting in the front of class so I didn’t lose focus or rushing after school to Grant Elementary to see my mentee. Everything had a purpose; it wasn’t just to look good on paper, but creating a better me.

After reviewing all the schools that I got into, I needed to figure out what was best for me. I couldn’t imagine myself walking into a hall that sits over 200 students for a lecture. I wanted to be able to go to class and know that the professor would know my name. I wanted a community that was welcoming and showed that they cared for their students; so, getting a private school education sounded like a really good plan, specifically LMU.

Being a first-generation student, I didn’t realize how much a private school was going to cost. I remember waiting anxiously for that one email from the LMU financial aid office. Every time I got home from school the first thing I would do was turn the computer on and log into my yahoo account. The day I saw LMU pop up in my inbox, I couldn’t come to open it. Finally I put my hand on the mouse, dragged it to the LMU message, and left-clicked it. I got really excited seeing the grants and scholarships; little did I know that the aid I received didn’t even cover half the cost.

I went through the email once again but slowly and read every little detail.

“How am I going to tell my parents that LMU costs \$50,000?”

This was all I thought about while continuously looking at my computer screen

for over an hour. Finally I decided to call my mom to my room. She didn’t know what to say.

“Do they think we are doctors or something, where are we supposed to get that kind of money,” expressed my mom.

“I don’t know.”

At that point I noticed that being in the middle (neither poor nor rich) kind of sucked. I didn’t know what I was going to do anymore. Since it was April, I constantly received emails that said,

“May 1st is around the corner! Where are you going to commit?”

I can remember this time of my life being difficult, I couldn't afford the school of my dreams. It really felt unfair. I had no idea how to get more money or who to ask. I began to think about what I could have done differently. If only I took more AP's or held higher positions within clubs and organizations, made myself a bigger fish in the pond. What could I have done differently to receive more aid was all I could think about.

My family and I let this situation pass for a few days, but we couldn't continue to let it pass our minds. Finally my parents and I decided to talk about it. I can tell that my mom was upset and didn't know what to tell me. She had no idea what to do either.

“I am sorry, *mija*,” my mom said, “We don't know if you will be able to attend LMU.”

I didn't know what to say. How was I supposed to respond? This was something that I never expected. I always thought that I would be able to attend my dream school, live on-campus, and begin a new chapter of my life. We left the conversation for the following day.

“I think you're going to have to go to SMC [Santa Monica College].”

A tear began running down my face. I thought I would be able to hold in my emotions, but it was impossible. For the next hour I sat in the bathroom crying. Now that I begin to think about it, I ask myself:

“How could you be so selfish?”

Why couldn't I have decided on another university? Was I making my family's life more complicated? At the time I didn't know what to do or how to fix this situation. I just felt like a baby crying. I would tell myself to suck it up and figure out how I will get my way through school. I began looking up scholarships and applied to many. My parents took that into consideration. I could tell they felt bad because they didn't know how to help me. But I began to realize that it was my responsibility.

This was the talk of the night for many nights. Finally my parents sat me down.

“Valerie, we need to talk and figure this out.”

I wanted my parents to tell me the final decision, I wanted them to tell me if I would be able to attend LMU or not. It was exhausting hearing them argue about financing my college education. They didn't want to let me down. And I never felt like they did, I really don't know where they got that from.

“As you know, your dad and I have been talking about this a lot.”

We talked about it for a while. They wanted to make it work: at first we talked about me going to LMU but still living at home. This created challenge number one of many, I didn't know how to drive. It was understood that I really

wanted the “college experience.” For me, this meant living on-campus, making all sorts of new friends, getting involved, going to parties, hanging out late, and growing as a person.

“Your dad and I feel that we can make this work somehow. We want you to be happy and accept the school that you truly deserve.”

I was completely speechless.

“Is this really happening? Can I officially call myself a lion?”

I was ecstatic for days. It was the best feeling in the world. I couldn’t wait to tell my friends. College Day at SAMO was approaching. It was time to show-off to everyone where I was going.

“Can we go to LMU to get me a sweatshirt?”

Walking into the bookstore was like walking into a candy store. It was still surreal to me that this was going to be my school. I literally want to buy everything, sweatshirts, shirts, key chains, sweats, beanie, mugs, folders, pretty much the whole store. Of course that didn’t happen. But I did walk-out with my brand new gray LMU sweatshirt. I couldn’t wait to sport my new gear on-campus.

I felt so many different emotions: excited, nervous, intimidated, proud, and free. But I wasn’t thinking about how this big loan my parents took out was going to affect us in the long run.

Finally, the day came to pack up all my stuff so I could move into my dorm room in Del Rey North. It was bittersweet: I finally got to live on my own, but I knew I was going to miss my family even though I was only 20 minutes away. I was actually happy to finally experience my own room, even though technically I did have a roommate. I never had my own space growing up: I have shared a room with my three younger siblings all my life, and I still continue sharing it. I would tag along with Meagan and her friends for the first couple of weeks because I had not made friends yet. It felt really lonely. I didn’t know anyone, and I felt that no one wanted to be my friend. I used to always ask myself, “How are all those students already friends?” There were groups of 10 or 15 students walking around with each other acting like they have been friends for years. It wasn’t until I met this girl named Marisa Cervantes that I finally felt school was going to go okay. All of the freshmen were walking over to the chapel, and I felt someone next to me, and she said, “Hi, my name is Marisa.” Throughout my head all I can think about was, “Yeea, I finally made a friend.”

As time went on, I suddenly felt guilty about being in school. My parents make sure that the bills and everything get paid, but my mom mentioned to me, “Paying this loan is never going to end. It’s going to be three years and it’s only gone down a couple grand.” And all I could think about is how much less the loan amount would be if I just stayed home, or even not have gone to LMU. For my sophomore year, I was planning to live on campus in McCarthy Hall because I was accepted into the ACE program. I was so excited to be rooming with my

homie, Channing Richmond. We already planned that we wanted loft beds and how we were going to decorate our room with pictures and lights. All this talk was still during my spring semester of freshman year. During the summer after I got my financial aid package I noticed that my balance was higher than last year because I no longer had a Cal Grant. I was so in shock that I just sat in front of my computer not knowing what to do or say. I had to call my mom to tell her. All I could think about was how I was going to afford to live on campus. After conversing for hours, my family and I decided that it would be best if I moved back home.

After my freshman year, I canceled my housing because it needed to happen. Ever since then I continue living at home. I started to take out private loans because my parents couldn't afford to take out another PLUS Loan, but they still have to co-sign. So I feel that I am still hurting them. I especially feel guilty because of my three younger siblings. Every car ride home the name, Sallie Mae, always gets brought up, and every time I can't help but get emotional especially when my mom always tells me, "I don't know what we are going to do once it's your sister's time to go to college." She always mentions, "Laura is going to have to go to SMC." That is the last thing I want. It's not that I believe that going to community college is bad. It's just that since I got the chance to go straight to a four-year, I want my siblings to be able to do the same. I don't want to be the reason why they can't go to a four-year just like me; they deserve to go. Because we know that we don't get a lot of financial aid, it's going to be the same thing for my younger siblings. I feel so helpless and selfish at times, and I don't want to be that burden.

It makes me feel worse because my mom always compares my sister and me; whether it's our grades, study habits, or even our involvement in school. Having Laura hear that SMC may be an option makes me nervous, which is why I try and push her to do well in school, especially since LMU is her dream school. But it backfires at times because she always gets upset with me and tells me, "I am not you, Valerie!" This statement really gets to me. I never try to make her me. All I want to do is help her, especially since I feel that I don't give her as much attention as she deserves because of how busy I am with school and the organizations I am involved with. I know that sometimes my siblings are struggling in school, and I can't help them because I am at school all day. Sometimes I don't get back home until 9 or 10 o'clock at night. I feel that I am failing as being the oldest; I am failing as their role model.

Three of my closest friends ended up going to SMC due to financial reasons, and so did many students from SAMOHI. It isn't a bad thing – it just seems difficult to get out of SMC in two years because it is overpopulated and students are always crashing classes. My friends tell me about their experiences crashing, and sometimes they don't get the classes they need. It is already the

third year, and my friends are still there. One of them is still continuing but is also working, but she focuses more on her working. My other two friends were supposed to transfer last year, but truthfully I don't know what happened, and I don't like to ask. I just don't want my sister having to go through that because she works hard in her classes.

There's so much pressure being the oldest, and I don't know how to deal with it sometimes. Not only do I have to deal with situations from school but from home, as well. Whether it's making sure the house is clean; helping my siblings with their homework; completing my school work; attending events at school; attending family events; being a support system for my siblings and my parents.

"How are you going to pay back all your loans?" my mom asks.

I never know how or what to respond.

"What can you do with a Sociology major?" many of my relatives ask me.

I remember trying to explain to my older cousins about my major and how I want to continue onto graduate school in the field of Education. When I told them, the first thing my cousin Tony asked was, "Why? Why not business so you can make a lot of money. Isn't that why you are going to school?" I guess they don't understand my view that I want a career path that will make me happy and want to go to work every day.

I feel like every car ride home, Sallie Mae always gets brought up. When my mom picks me up it always starts off positive and we talk about how our day went, then out of nowhere it starts. I always try to avoid it by listening to music or just looking out the window and act like I'm not paying attention. What makes me mad the most is that my mom always tends to say, "You don't understand!" When she brings it up I try to change the subject right away. But I know I do: I know that I need to get a job. I know that my loans are increasing because of the interest rate. I know that I need to keep up with my one loan that I am currently paying for. I know that if anything goes wrong with my loans it will affect her credit. No matter what I tell her it feels as if she thinks I don't understand. Let's just say, car ride homes tend to stay quiet after that. I just never feel like talking after that.

This kind of pressure overstresses me and sometimes even makes me question my major and the path that I would like to take. It has created an emotional side of me that has never come out before. Any little thing can ruin the way I feel, and then I just want to be alone. I never cried in front of other people growing up, especially at school. But for some reason being in college, crying just tends to happen especially with my sorority sisters. Sometimes I just want to sit on the bluff and cry my frustrations away, but I don't want others to see or hear me. I can't think of one day that I am not thinking about what I am going to do once I graduate. I have been thinking about this since I was a freshman.

I try to not let my emotions get the best of me. But it is hard today not to have this special feeling come out when my mom and I drive on the 90 freeway

and look-out at the white LMU letters on the bluff. Who would have ever known that this would be my school? Sometimes I sit on the bluff and look out at the freeways and reminisce about those long ride homes. This little girl sitting in the backseat of her mom's Nissan looking out the window into a world she had no idea that existed. Now being the first in her family to graduate on May 10th of 2014. To some people those letters are just a nice picture, but to me it is a symbol of my struggles but also my accomplishments.